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I'll Have the Usual: Mount Monadnock Always Delivers

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Monadnock: What Changes and What Doesn't

I'll Have the Usual

Mount Monadnock always delivers

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Editor's note: In the first of two views of the famous Mount Monadnock, a woman who knows the peak as well as her own shoes celebrates the familiar.

For about a dozen years, I've repeatedly climbed Mount Monadnock, a mountain that stands alone in southwestern New Hampshire. It is close enough that I spend more time on the trail than I do on the road, a major criterion for a good hike. And although it tops out at just under 3,200 feet, it is a respectable mountain, ringed with a girdle of easy but interesting cliffs and offering omnidirectional views from its naked summit.

People often ask me, "Don't you get bored, climbing the same mountain over and over?"

No, I do not. This mountain has so many trails, I have yet to set foot on some of them. Every season, for those who pay attention to seasons, is different.

But that's not the point.

The point is that the mountain is the same, unchanging, unaltered.

My brother and I went back a few years ago to the neighborhood where we grew up. The drugstore on the corner was gone. The vacant lot where we played was covered by a townhouse built to the very edges of the property. A new middle school covered the block where my best friend's house had been. I found it something of a miracle that my parents' house still stood, although it was painted mauve and the elm tree, the arborvitae, and the English ivy have all been ripped out.

The town where I live now—aggressive about buying tracts for conservation—bristles, fights, and claws when open space is threatened. Yet even that land is not safe but vulnerable when the state deems it needs some of the acreage, as happened recently, for something like a water tank.

In the time and place where I was reared, in the Southwest, everybody seemed to think "progress" and "development" were the best goals of a society. It was a place thrilled and prideful at its inexorable progress. I wondered about it at the time. I remember asking my father what we were going to do when all the oil in the world was used up. He laughed.

My present hometown knows better. We tend to gnash our teeth at land lost to development.

The familiar girdle of easy but interesting cliffs on Monadnock. CHRISTINE WOODSIDE

When I go to the mountains, I'm looking for more than peace and quiet. I'm looking for a place that looks the same as I remember. In this protean, morphing, shifting, diversifying, destroying, rebuilding, constantly improving, and despoiling society where we live, there is comfort in finding places left mostly alone.

Even something that seems not to change still changes. Time does its thing, even here; trees grow, streams cut, rocks fall. The climate is changing on my mountain. But here, time did go backwards, too. Only the foundation stones remain of the Victorian hotel that stood halfway up its flank in the 1860s. Old trails have been lost; some aficionados of this mountain make a hobby of tracing them out again. In the woods on its lower slopes, I still see stone walls marking the bounds of pastures where optimistic farmers grazed cows. Earlier in its history, the mountain was forested to the summit, but fires a couple of centuries ago changed that for good.

Even in my memory, which goes back a few decades, I think there was a refreshment stand on the peak, above treeline. The only clues that I'm right are the remnants of iron bolts in the bedrock. That's one change I'm happy about.

I know time works its will, even on granite. Over 80-some years, a good bit of engineering skill was expended in keeping the rocks that formed New Hampshire's famous profile of the Old Man of the Mountain on Cannon Cliff from cascading into the anonymity of the valley. Futile. He's gone. There's talk from some of restoring him somehow, but New Hampshirites bristle at that. Enough phony stuff in the world, they say; let nature act.

When I climb my mountain, the only decision I need to make is which of my favorite spots I will visit today. The only rude surprises (aside from an occasional rowdy group encountered straggling up the summit cone) are provided by the cooler temperatures 2,000 feet higher.

Yes, it's a very tame mountain. If I want solitude, I don't choose this place. But going there is like taking a familiar road home. Through the little village. Up the state road, past the Bible camp, to the park entrance. Through the trees to the ranger's hut, where the parking fee has remained the same (how many parking lots can say that?) as long as I can remember.

If it's winter, I know where to park to get some sun through the windshield; if it's summer, vice versa. Once on the trail, I know that in early spring I'm likely to step across a specimen of yellow violet growing right in the middle of the path. I'll hear the hoarse chant of the black-throated blue warbler, a bird I first (and only once) saw here. As the season progresses, I can count

on seeing alpine rhododendron in bloom, cotton grass tufts above a tarn, mountain cranberries lying low. Above treeline, there'll be ravens, golden eagles cruising, juncos foraging for hikers' crumbs, cedar waxwings twittering from the same spruce as last year.

I do forget, from climb to climb, how much this mountain asks. How there's no trail that avoids a scramble up its bastion of ledges. How the summit is almost always windy, sometimes violently so. How much longer the descent is than I want to admit. Patiently, the mountain repeats these lessons for me every time, like a grade school teacher going over the same material for a slow learner. There's satisfaction in thinking, oh yeah, I knew that.

I know better than to think of mountains as benign. Mountains are indifferent. But if we take care of them, they provide us a place, one of the few places, where we sort of know what to expect.

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